After 100 B.C., the kingdom of Axum spread from the Ethiopian highlands to the Red Sea coast. By about A.D. 400, Axum controlled a rich trade network. A key part of this was the port of Adulis. Axum’s trade routes connected Africa, India, and the Mediterranean. As a result, traders from other regions brought unique cultural influences, along with goods, to Axum.

In the 300s, Christianity became Axum’s official religion. At first, Christianity strengthened trade between Axum and other Christian countries. However, as Islam spread across North Africa in the 600s, Axum became isolated and slowly lost power.

Axum’s legacy lived on in a portion of present-day Ethiopia. There, Christianity and descendants of the Axumites survived for centuries. This was due in part to the unifying influence of Christianity. This gave Ethiopia a single, unique identity among Muslim neighbors. Ethiopia developed a distinct culture. For example, under King Lalibela in the 1200s, eleven remarkable churches were carved into the solid rock of mountains.

After Axum declined, Muslim communities arose along the East African coast. They were set up by Arabs and Persians trading with Asia. By the 600s, ships regularly sailed to India and back. Trade goods from Africa, Southeast Asia, and China helped the East African cities grow wealthy. Relations between cities were generally peaceful. By the 1000s, a blending of African, Asian, and Arab influences combined to create a new language and culture, both called Swahili.

South and inland from the coastal cities was Great Zimbabwe, the capital city of the Zimbabwe empire. The empire reached its height around 1300. There, people mined gold and traded goods across the Indian Ocean. Little is known about Great Zimbabwe’s government. Artifacts show that its artisans were skilled jewelry makers and weavers. By the 1500s, Zimbabwe was in decline. Later, Portuguese traders tried, but failed, to find the former empire’s source of gold.

Review Questions
1. How did Christianity affect Axum?

2. What happened after Zimbabwe’s decline?